



Community Forum on Race Report

The Forum on Race sponsored by the Little Rock Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission (www.littlerock.org/CityManager/Divisions/RacialAndCulturalDiversityCommission) and the Nehemiah Group (www.nehemiah-group.org) on May 8, 2007 at Philander Smith College was the first of a three part series whose sole purpose was and is to provide a framework for better understanding ourselves in relation to racial, cultural and faith-based grids through which we all tend to view reality.

Thus, like the other forums, this first forum on race was not intended to specifically address the current issues facing the LRSD or to provide a setting for the promotion of related agendas. Rather, these forums consider how decisions can and should be made apart from contentious emotion. Thus, organizers hoped to provide a context for such understanding and tools for working alongside others in a variety of situations with whom we disagree. Ultimately, however, organizers hope their efforts will encourage the greater community of Little Rock to help resolve current points of contention in the best interest of young people and the city of Little Rock.

We hope as we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School this year that the courage to make a change is remembered and respected.

Forum on Race Panel

Dr. Walter Kimbrough, Ph.D., Philander Smith College President

Joyce Elliott, Former State Representative and Educator

Minnejean Brown Trickey, Little Rock Nine and Social Activist

Dr. Johanna Miller Lewis, UALR Professor of History

Ron Lanoue, Former NCCJ Executive Director and Arkansas Legal Services Partnership Executive Director

Moderators: Mayo Johnson, Chair of the Little Rock Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission and Mark DeYmaz of the Nehemiah Group.

Forum on Culture: 6:30 – 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday, June 12, 2007
University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service, Sturgis Hall
1200 President Clinton Ave., Little Rock, AR

Forum on Faith: 6:30 – 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday, August 14, 2007
Mosaic Church of Central AR
6420 Colonel Glenn Rd., Little Rock, AR

Key Questions

1. What is race (culture, faith)?
2. What should we understand about race (culture, faith) that can help us in critical thinking, decision-making and conflict resolution?
3. How can we avoid cynicism, division and destructiveness built purely on racial (cultural, faith-based) grids in order to promote civil discourse and social harmony?

Forum Summary

Based on panelist comments and exchanges with the audience, we identified five major accomplishments of this forum as well as six major recommendations. Furthermore, audience feedback is summarized.

What were the major accomplishments of the forum on race?

1. Crises became a source of civic discourse and renewal.

Prompted by the school board division and motivated by a desire to respect the hard earned progress of the Little Rock Nine, this first forum was a positive step in responding to the school board crises with a constructive discourse on race. Thus, rather than further fragmentation by taking sides on the issues; the leaders and participants in this effort saw an opportunity to work together. The panel included individuals that have worked for decades to make progress on race relations. However, in light of the school board crises, the voices from the forum, from the opening remarks by the Mayor to closing comments by the moderators, represented a renewed focus to improve race relations.

This forum was a tangible step in such a renewed effort. Dr. Kimbrough, President of Philander Smith College spoke of his hopes for forums like this to create a "living room" for the community to talk about real issues. Thus, our hope is that similar forums will be devised to further enrich community wide understanding while deepening our motivation to find new ways to approach and talk about race relations in constructive ways. This goal was reached as challenging questions and issues were presented and discussed without a sense of threat or personal attack on individuals.

2. We were reminded of our common ground--our children.

One audience member asked early in the evening "what it would take to "include children and communities outside of the public school system?" He told of removing his children from a private school because of the racism they had experienced there. His story was a reminder that kids still suffer racism in the form of prejudicial and discriminatory remarks. This reminder underscored a tone the panelists had set—racism is still real and still must be faced and addressed.

The panelist challenged the school board as well as anyone listening to find common ground in our concern for children. Minnejean Brown Trickey echoed statements heard throughout the evening when she spoke at a personal level: "Aren't we sick of our children suffering like this? When do we stop it? We can't keep hearing these stories. Who are we? What are we about? We can go to the moon, but we can not live together." She went on to state that she believed that segregation remains the second highest value in the USA. "That's how the world sees it...in fact that is who we are and either we like it or we don't."

While differences will no doubt always exist about determining what is best for our children, the exchanges in this forum focused on how we can work together for a common good. Joyce Elliot, in responding to an audience members question about the school board noted that whatever divisions exist, each parents wants what is best for their children. Our common ground is the value we place on our children and a desire to not let them down.

3. Race was presented as more complex then skin color.

"What does it mean to *not be black enough*?"

This question surfaced late in the evening, but was implied earlier. Dr. Miller-Lewis, a historian from UALR, noted that we must get past stereotypes and labels that fail to see differences within racial groups: "we need to see others as the same as ourselves." Toward the end of the evening, the above question on "black enough" surfaced in the context of a community member frustrated by her attempts to create diverse task forces and hiring practices. She had been repeatedly told that this man or woman is "not really black." She was confused.

Several panelists encouraged her to do what was right and focus on whether the person was the right one. Dr. Kimbrough stressed that her question got at the real issue, that race is the secondary issue. He asked: "What is authentically black? Who defines it for a group for a people?" Joyce Elliot underscored this point by pointing out the problem faced when a white person moves to a black community. He friends might ask "are you one of us?" Blacks face the same problem. We are encouraged to be with those who are different, but if we are with those who are different, we are told "you are not one of us." Her own personal response is "to refuse" to allow anyone to tell her who she is.

In short, panelists agreed that race is not an issue simply of skin color. Issues of culture, background, and economics are all critical. In short, to move our community forward we must not leave our discussions at the level of racism based on skin color, but dig further to understand different histories and values. Thus the explorations of culture and faith in the coming forums are needed as well as future dialogue to ensure that we get beyond the surface.

4. A challenge was given to forget history to create a new history.

The historian on the panel, Dr. Miller-Lewis, challenged us to "occasionally ... forget history." She stated that "1957 is so alive it is palatable" and the "lines so deep we have trouble bridging them." Her point was that sometimes to move forward, we must learn to not repeat the same stories and lines from the past, but to identify new questions, and to engage in new learning.

This forum created a source for stories that are not just about what happened in the past, but new stories that are about our common efforts in the present. We can now speak of an evening when civic and community leaders joined with community members to begin a dialogue about race relations. Joyce Elliot, former state representative and educator, spoke of her own commitment to "not give into cynicism." Instead, she suggested creative programs, such as a teacher/student exchange between public and private schools. She also stressed the need to engage realtors in "diversity audits" given a known track record of realtors contributing to the problem of segregated neighborhoods. Her remarks were underscored by Ron Lanoue, Former NCCJ Executive Director and Arkansas Legal Services Partnership Executive Director, who indicated that in order to not repeat stories from the past; we need a time commitment to be together, especially civic leaders, to "hammer out" issues, "to get to common ground." In short, we do not need to focus on the 50th anniversary in terms of an old story, but rather a story of a community committed to renewal and growth in race relations.

5. A new language or approach in the way we talk about race became clear.

The response to crises as a time for renewal, finding a common ground in our children, the complexity of race, and the need to create new positive stories on race relations made it clear that we need a new vocabulary, a new way to think about and talk about race and racial issues. This new vocabulary or approach should motivate us to be "deliberate," as Joyce Elliot mentioned, in our effort to move toward each other. Furthermore, panelists responded to an audience question that made it clear we need to think more broadly about how we are to address the achievement gap between races.

Phrases and statements like: *Black/white, oppressor/oppressed, you can't possibly understand us, and majority/minority* do not attract different groups to work together. Rather, they tend to create division. Former Representative Elliot suggested that conversations and relationships characterized by "gentleness" toward one is a place to start. We gained a glimpse of such gentleness in experiences shared by panelists and

community members as they sought to understand the experiences of others and to avoid demeaning others because they "mess up" or do not understand our experiences.

Concerning educational achievement, Dr. Kimbrough noted that the gap was not going to be reduced simply by more efforts by the school board or superintendents, but rather by "students who want to learn and involved parents." In response to an audience member raising concerns about African American males not doing well in the educational system, Dr. Kimbrough noted that with 70% of African Americans born out of wedlock, someone has to step up and help with children that are not their own. For example, "Big Brothers and Big Sisters" has 200 children on their waiting list, most of them African American males. Thus, he encouraged more talk and action in response to this need rather than a sole focus on the public education systems.

What are major ways to improve race relations?

1. Create a list of words and phrases that create confusion between races.

The questions that surfaced toward the end began to get at the deeper issues that create confusion and mistrust. For example, as already noted, just gaining clarity on what it means to be "black enough" may create more understanding. Based on Dr. Kimbrough and Joyce Elliot's responses, the black community is sorting out the meaning of such phrases. We need to identify other similar phrases that can serve the basis for future forums and that can be posted as a resource in faith and government based websites.

2. Identify stories of successful race relations in Little Rock.

The article in the N.Y Times about the school board division was mentioned more than once as a source of embarrassment. The *op. Ed* piece made the front cover of the NY Times the day of this event. However, after the event, a closer reading of the article made it clear that the media portrayed the issue as a racial one without clearly reflecting that the division does not fall along racial lines. There are blacks and whites on both sides of the division.

Thus, future events need to reflect on the progress being made in race relations. We need to ask: "where are their examples of neighborhoods and schools where race relationships have improved?" As Lanoue indicated, "we must have common stories about working together." For example, there are now several integrated churches. School and civic programs that are modeling best practices at improving race relationships need to be showcased. In short, stories of success tend to breed success, thus we need to inquire further about what is going well and the export those stories to the media and to the public.

3. Identify lessons to be learned from other communities and cities.

The problems with the school board and with race relations are not unique to Little Rock. Future panels could do more to reflect on best practices (as well as practices to avoid) found in cities that have made progress. Are there cities that have curbed racial profiling? What examples might we find of ways to slow or stop "white flight"? As one panelist indicated, we need a new approach that will engender motivation and interest in improving race relationships. Such models likely exist in our sister cities. Perhaps from other models we can learn more about developing the critical mass for positive change that Minnejean Brown Trickey presented as our real need.

4. Commit to individual action to improve race relations.

Ron Lanoue spoke of the importance of "public action and private compassion." Both are clearly needed. Specific suggestions for private action included:

- Accept a moral imperative to find common ground, move past labels, and comfort zones.
- Engage more mentors for children being raised in single parent homes.
- See the other person as the same as us.
- See ourselves as custodians of values, not just resources.
- Realize that our black and white communities are not monolithic.
- Gain perspective via constant spiritual renewal and learning.
- Embrace working with those who are different to gain fresh input.
- Be deliberate in moving back toward one another.

5. Consider a variety of public initiatives that have proven effective.

- Encourage institutions; such as the private business sector, schools/universities/colleges, government, realtors, law enforcement, etc. to do a diversity audit regarding practices and policies to promote an environment of equality that is free of bias.
- Make demands on society for places for our kids to play, on improved education.
- Engage in intensive leadership workshops for blacks and whites (e.g., Our Town).
- Use forums like this one and at other universities in which we bring in speakers from diverse backgrounds.
- Maintain the principle of non-violence.
- Pulpit exchanges and common celebrations across faiths.

6. Find practical ways to build trust.

Mayor Stodala spoke of his hope that the forum would provide a chance for dialogue on ways to address the impact race has on all aspects of life in the city. In particular he indicated the need for trust to be built by talking openly about issues. The issue of trust emerged in the context of the UALR survey (handed out at the event) that indicated trust levels between the races as a concern. However, we do not have a clear understanding of the sources of mistrust, nor the ways to make significant progress. For example, what are the sources of fear and concern that create "white flight?" To what extent to the tensions on the school board represent citywide tensions about education agendas that

merit forums for open dialogue to build trust and understanding? Panelist provided several suggestions for action relevant to building trust:

- Change the language we are using, the way we view the issue.
- Become more aware of each other's cultures and language, including a better understanding of the issue of authentic blackness.
- Move past rhetoric of liberal and conservative.
- Encourage student/teacher exchanges between private and public schools.
- Work to not be racist behind closed doors.
- Truth is a good place to start; cynicism can help, speak frankly.
- Realize we are experts only in our own experiences, we do not know it all.
- Be gentle with each other, not castigate the other when they mess up

Evaluation Form Feedback

Question 1: In what ways do you see yourself working to improve your relationships with members of other races or ethnic groups?

- a) Participating in forums at UAMS and AR Children's Hospital to address racial/diversity issues.
- b) I work to promote communication and understanding across many artificial chasms such as race, geography, "class", management/labor divisions, etc. I try to teach my children well.
- c) By being open to learning and accepting views, opinions, and alternatives.
- d) 1) By following basic principles "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "Love ye one another." 2) By being open and honest regarding race issues while giving due consideration to the feelings and opinions of others.
- e) I am a member of the Just Communities of Central AR. I will work for a more just distribution of wealth and power to achieve peace and mutual support for the common good.
- f) Having a continuous, meaningful dialogue with someone of a different ethnic group. To gain a better understanding a person and their culture.
- g) No response.
- h) As Mr. Lanoue defined it, I think I practice "soft power" at every opportunity. I moved to a mixed race neighborhood by demanding that our real estate agent show us "more diverse" places in the city. I educate myself about prejudice, power, and privilege. I share what I've learned with others in non-threatening environments.

Question 2: What is your view on race relations in Little Rock?

- a) Racism is alive and well in Little Rock – those who are not part of the solution, are part of the problem.
- b) We have some wonderful people who are in love and charity with their neighbor, but we don't listen to them. We give too much attention to a few who work in a divisive way.

- c) Tense – slow to change – prone to back sliding. Community leaders & citizens must press each other on tough questions & make the sacrifices necessary to make real & lasting gains.
- d) Same as always. People interact most with people they share commonalities with and spend little time proactively looking into learning about other outside that group.
- e) It is in trouble because the truth of our existence is not told. Economic oppression is at the heart of our problem.
- f) Unaddressed openly and honestly.
- g) That not enough has been done to dismantle the de facto racism, complacency about the progress so far.
- h) Lack of respect and dignity for one another. Ignorance breeds racism on all sides. Too much hate, not enough love.

Question 3: What was the most beneficial aspect of this forum for improving understanding between races?

- a) Defining the divisive issues and their historic/social origins.
- b) Ms. Trickey's insights were invaluable. I also appreciated Mr. Kimbrough's remarks at the outset. Joyce Elliot was especially good, because she was absolutely candid.
- c) Honest, respectful dialogue.
- d) No response.
- e) It is like trying to cure cancer with a ten bag. There must be a joint activity by all citizens to change laws and control of laws so that justice will be done for all regardless of race or economic status.
- f) “??”
- g) The panelists were very knowledgeable and pointed.
- h) Gaining an understanding of why institutional racism persists. It gives better direction on where to focus efforts dismantle racism one by one by one. I took lots of notes.

Question 4: Was there enough time given for the presenters to speak?

- a) Yes. Outstanding forum of speakers!
- b) Not enough for some. Perhaps the panel was a little too large.
- c) Yes.
- d) No response.
- e) It was the content of the remarks that was weak and ordinary. There must be a personal change in attitudes that are rewarded provided the attitudes are positive and supportive of everyone.
- f) Yes.
- g) Yes.
- h) Too much. Maybe have each panelist answer one question, instead of all the questions repeatedly. Each might all have different opinions on each question, you only need one person to get the conversation started. One answer a question, another rebut the comments made, then open up to discussion?

Question 5: Was there enough time given to questions and answers from the participants?

- a) Yes. Outstanding!
- b) Yes.
- c) Yes.
- d) No response.
- e) Denominational leaders and religious leaders must publicly declare that racism is a sin. Gonads
- f) Yes.
- g) Yes.
- h) Not really. What about public comments too? Maybe the answers don't come from an educated panel of people but from the people themselves.

Question 6: Were the answers given to your questions satisfactory?

- a) Yes, their answers were superb.
- b) I didn't pose any questions. I thought the answers were fine.
- c) Yes – very thoughtful.
- d) No response.
- e) No response.
- f) Some of them.
- g) No response.
- h) I didn't ask any. Sometimes the responses didn't directly answer the questions other people asked.

Question 7: Was the facility and equipment conducive to learning and discussion?

- a) Yes. (no mosquitoes this time.)
- b) Yes.
- c) Mostly – hard to hear some of the questions.
- d) Yes.
- e) No response.
- f) Yes.
- g) A very nice auditorium. The PA system not quite loud enough.
- h) OK, when you could hear everything.

Question 8: What could we do to make this forum better?

- a) Get more people to attend.
- b) Perhaps shrink the panel, and promote a little more interchange among panel members.
- c) I love the idea of promoting greater student turn out by giving credit for attending.
- d) No response.
- e) No response.
- f) Advertised the forum better. I did not find out about the forum until today.
- g) No response.
- h) Why wasn't the auditorium full of Philander Smith's students? Take it into every school and business in Little Rock and Arkansas.

Question 9: Do you want to have a similar forum on another topic related to racial and cultural diversity? If so, what topics are you interested in?

- a) Faith/Religion. Culture. Immigration.
- b) How to operate a desegregated school district in a segregated town? Can a school board pull itself out of years of historical more and put kids first?
- c) The AR business community & racial diversity, inclusion & advancement.
- d) No response.
- e) No response.
- f) No response.
- g) The relationship between race and class.
- h) Racism as it relates to immigration and “terrorist threat” – the role the media has played in turning fear into racism.

Question 10: General comments?

- a) Ask the LR Chamber of Commerce to sponsor, lead & advertise one of these sessions.
- b) Thanks. –Baker Kurrus
- c) Fabulous program, especially for one who is still (and always will be) climbing the learning curve.
- d) No response.
- e) No response.
- f) No response.
- g) More should have been done to increase attendance and the diversity of the group. No young people.
- h) Heard comments about no refreshments. Would a business sponsor food for the forums? Esp. when attendees come directly from the office, would be a nice gesture. Well done!

Partners

Philander Smith College
University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service
Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas

Information

Additional reports were available at the Forum on Race regarding the 2001 Arkansas Fair Housing Law, the 2005 Arkansas Racial Profile Law and the 2006-2007 UALR Racial Attitudes Report (<http://www.ualr.edu/iog/racialattitudes.htm>).

Please contact Carlette Henderson, Executive Director of the Little Rock Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission at 501-244-5483 or Dr. Gerald Driskill of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock at 501-569-3158 with questions about this report.